

The spark came

WITH THE FLOOD OF CONVICTION.

In 1939 the Chief of Engineers was authorized to restudy and update the “308 Report,” an overall plan for the region’s water resources along the Arkansas River and its tributaries in Oklahoma and Arkansas.

It was a process that would consume much of the Tulsa District’s time until at least 1943, with as many as 300 Tulsa employees working on a new plan called the “758 Report.” Representatives of the Southwestern Division as well as Tulsa and Little Rock Districts were named to an Arkansas River Survey Board created to guide the study.

Its primary purpose, as Settle points out, was “to determine whether improvement for dependable navigation was economically justified and to determine hydroelectric power potentials on the mainstem and tributaries in those two states.”²

As if to highlight the need for civil works, some of the worst flooding in the region’s history occurred in 1941 and 1943. The late Tulsa consulting engineer Bill Fell recalled the period as having three “1000-year floods” during the time he and other engineers were trying to close the Pensacola Dam. The month of October 1941 was the wettest in Oklahoma records to that time, and the 1941 flood between Muskogee and Fort Smith was counted then as the largest of the century.

It was, however, quickly exceeded by the floods of May 1943, when rainfall as great as 24 inches in six days, centered near McAlester and Muskogee, set flood records that still hold today. To make matters worse, the flows from three uncontrolled streams — the Grand, Verdigris, and Arkansas — all reached their peak levels at the same time near Muskogee, producing a river nearly 50 feet deep running at 700,000 cubic feet per second. Damages have been estimated in the \$50 million range, and more than a score of people lost their lives.

The 1943 flood forged a firm flood-control partnership among Newt Graham, his long-time ally Don McBride, and Oklahoma’s new Governor Bob Kerr who later called it the “flood of conviction.”³

Other fighters for flood control included Victor Barnett, associate editor of *The Tulsa Tribune* and the 1940 president of the Tulsa Chamber of Commerce; Glade Kirkpatrick, chairman of the Chamber’s waterway committee; and Russell Rhodes, Chamber executive officer.

Graham was convinced that flood control was a key to providing navigation for the region. His belief was partly verified when the four-year “758 report” was completed in 1943. It showed that the best plan for Arkansas River water resources development would combine navigation, hydroelectric power, flood control, and other beneficial uses.



Don McBride



Robert S. Kerr



John McClellan